

# Wildlife at center of battle

**Congressmen say endangered species are their top concern in a debate over the Missouri River.**

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**Washington, D.C.** - The piping plover, pallid sturgeon and interior least tern usually gain little notice in their native Missouri River habitat on Iowa's western border.

For the second year in a row, though, they are the wildlife stars of a pitched political battle among Midwestern members of Congress.

The endangered birds and fish are at the center of a debate over whether the Missouri River's level should be altered by its managers, restoring the river to its natural ebb and flow.

It's a controversial approach known as "spring rise" that has pitted politicians upstream against those downstream. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials say the changes would aid fish spawning, develop sandbar habitats and increase shallow water needed by both birds and fish.

Rep. Tom Latham of Iowa, a Republican and longtime opponent of spring rise, last month inserted language barring the practice in a \$23 billion energy and water appropriations bill. "This is a major victory of principle and common sense over that of bad science and politics," Latham said afterward.

The appropriations bill was approved 405-15 on June 26 by the House, with the support of every member of Iowa's delegation.

Latham's amendment would overturn any attempts by the Army Corps of Engineers to implement spring rise, which is an increase in the levels and flows of the river in the spring once every three years, on average.

Latham said farm and conservation groups throughout Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri oppose spring rise. It would increase flooding, endanger barge traffic on the river, reduce power generation in the summer and possibly harm the birds and fish it is intended to protect, he said.

Powerful advocates of spring rise - including Sen. Tom Daschle of South Dakota, a Democrat and the new Senate majority leader - argue that the extinction of the plover, sturgeon and tern could be prevented if the Corps acted.

Daschle and others are also interested in preserving recreational and tourism opportunities on lakes and reservoirs upstream, such as near Gavin's Point Dam on the South Dakota-Nebraska border.

"Once again, pro-barging interests on the Missouri River are attempting to block the open, public process for revising the Missouri River master manual," Daschle said after the House action.

But Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa says a halt to barge traffic would "deliver the western part of America's great grain belt into the monopolistic hands of the railroads."

The upstream-downstream fight flared in 2000, when President Clinton vetoed last year's version of the energy and water bill because it included language similar to Latham's. The Senate failed to override the veto, with Grassley, a Republican, voting for the override and Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa against it.

Latham sharply criticized Harkin at the time, saying he had "chosen the interests of South Dakota over those from the state he was elected to represent."

Harkin, a Democrat, said he wanted the Corps to be allowed to study how best to deal with river flow. Aides said Friday he wants the Corps to continue to solicit input from all parties. He is also concerned about the possibility the whole issue will be settled through lawsuits in federal court.

Daschle is expected to battle efforts by Sen. Christopher Bond, a Missouri Republican, to insert language similar to Latham's in a Senate version of the energy and water bill.

That means the issue probably will be fought out in a conference committee before the bill goes to President Bush. The anti-spring-rise forces are counting on his support, given comments Bush made while campaigning in Missouri in 2000.

"I stand with Missouri farmers. I believe we can save species without affecting the farmers' way of life," Bush said in October, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.